

## BETWEEN DANCES

By SARA CONE BRYANT

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Anne Gregory sat in a corner of Fran Baumgarten's library listening to the snatches of talk and music which penetrated the heavy draperies between her retreat and the salon, and enjoying the moment's stolen respite from social duties all the more for her uncertainty as to how long it would last. Through the small gap in the portiere she caught fugitive glimpses of passing guests. One tall, square-shouldered, in the Prussian uniform, paused briefly, just in view. Two charming English girls passed, and then a second tall man's figure, in evening clothes.

And then the draperies were gently pushed aside, and Mr. John Durham came quietly in through the opening.

"You'd much better go away, Jack," the girl murmured, lazily.

"Thanks, awfully," was the cheerful response, "since you are so pressing, I will stay a bit." And he proceeded to settle himself on a chair arm opposite the window-seat where Anne had curled herself up.

Anne tapped her foot on the wooden edge of the window-seat; finally she laughed. Mr. Durham looked gently surprised. Then his face grew quite serious. "Do you like these Germans, Anne?" he said.

"Too abstract. Make it concrete, Jackie, and I'll tell you."

"Well, von Hammerstein, for instance?"

"Certainly I do," promptly; "don't you?"

"I don't think I know him quite as well as you do."

"If you did, you would," said Anne, enthusiastically. "He is—so interesting."

Out of the corner of her eye she observed that her enthusiasm awakened no response.

When Jack spoke it was on another subject, though not unconnected with the former: "Pretty swell violets you have on," he said. "Made in Germany?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, am I the only man who isn't allowed to send you violets? You are wearing some to-night."

"Why, Jack!—Jack, don't you see, you are the only man I know well enough to—well—to advise for his own good?"

Anne's face wavered between resentment and guilty amusement; finally a reluctant smile crept toward the dimple in her left cheek, and she lifted reproachful eyes to his.

"Ah, Jackie, how mean you are!" she said, in a small voice she reserved for him.

"Anne!" Her heart jumped with the startle of it. The voice was no more Jack's familiar voice than the stern white face was his face.

"You have called me a boy a good many times in the past, Anne," he said. "I am not a boy. The time has come when you must understand that."

Something in the low repressed tones hurried the girl's heart-beats and made it hard to hold her eyes level on his. She found her eyes dropping till she could see nothing but her own tightly clasped hands; at that she was both angry and ashamed; it had never happened to her before.

"It means something to me," she heard him saying, "that you should not think of me as a boy. I find I can't stand it any longer. Anne, will you look at me, please?"

Anne's ears were full of pounding noises, and her heart was doing uncomfortable things out of locality; as for looking at him!—she realized suddenly that she was afraid to look. Then she considered; afraid of Jack—Jack? That was plainly ridiculous. She would not yield to such folly; she would look at him coolly and say: "Well?" But she did not. And then through the pounding the voice came again, still lower, but with a quiet incomprehensible authority in it: "Look at me, Anne!"

He had not moved, but it seemed to her that he had taken her face in his two hands and was lifting it; and the rebellious eyes followed the same imperious power. A long minute she looked with eyes that could not escape the passionate holding of his, while he gave her his soul to read as a man holds out his palm to a friend. And when the minute was over, the knowledge had crept through every fiber of her that the face was indeed not the face of a boy, but of a man.

"Queen Anne—my queen!" he breathed.

The girl made a hasty, tremulous motion, slipping to her feet as if to escape some danger. The movement brought her gown against him, and both his hands closed round the one which hung at her side. The clasp was so unlike the friendly grasp of the hand she knew as Jack's that she thought she did not like it; a little gasp came from her lips with the incoherent words: "Oh, please—oh, don't, Jack; you make me very uncomfortable—I don't want—"

"I must speak, Anne. How long do you suppose a man can bear this sort of thing? If you have any mercy in you, tell me now."

"Tell—you—what?"

"Whether there is any hope for me or not. I have waited till I can't wait any longer, little girl; I've got to have you—or—lose you, now. If—von Hammerstein—if I'm out of the running, for God's sake tell me so!"

"No!" desperately, "I can't. I am

same—nothing is the same—I don't know what I think."

"When will you know?" huskily.

"I—oh, some one is coming! Let me go, Jack!"

As he released her hand she slipped by him, and at the moment a louder chord from the piano sounded through the opening portiere, and Von Hammerstein came into the room. He flushed and smiled with an air of satisfaction at sight of the slender, white figure. "Found at last, gna-diges Fraulein," he said, coming directly toward her, but including the other man in his salute. "You have been a truant."

Anne steadied herself to the instinctively rally every woman, old or young, makes when hard pressed. She managed to smile back, as she said: "And are you the truant officer?"

"Gott bewahr," laughed the lieutenant, "I am not in the civil service. But you—they are playing a waltz—"

as he spoke his glance grew keen, passing from the girl to the man, then became carefully observing. He had paused, and Mr. Durham began to speak, quickly, but in an ordinary tone. So it happened that both men said, almost in unison:

"This was my dance, I think?" and "May I have the honor?"

Then both stopped, and straightened involuntarily. The German flushed; the American was very pale. In a moment the lieutenant turned with an elaborate formality to the other man. "We are rivals," he said, dramatically, and with a smile. "Will either of us withdraw?"

"Not unless you wish to," said the other, with the same courteous inflection, but gravely.

A gleam came into the lieutenant's blue eyes, and a direct look passed between the two. After that neither man looked at the other; each looked at the girl, and both spoke in the tone of accentuated lightness the lieutenant had used. The latter said: "We are in your hands, fair lady, which will you honor?"

"But, meine Herren," said Anne, with a touch of nervousness in her smile, "I cannot dance with you both at once; you surely will not put me to the discomfort of denying myself either pleasure?" But her questioning look met no sign of the expected withdrawal in either face. Instead, Jack spoke, his eyes meeting hers squarely: "It is too bad; but you see Von Hammerstein and I are such bitter rivals that we insist on a decision from you."

"Precisely," assented the German, bowing; "we await your choice, gna-diges Fraulein."

A vivid flush sprang to the girl's cheeks. "I think I shall have to sit out this dance," she said, her head a little higher than it had been.

"Pardon me," interrupted Mr. Durham, quickly; "don't say you won't play, please. The object of this game is to choose your partner—and Lieut. von Hammerstein and I are very anxious to play."

"Very," said the gentleman referred to.

Anne stood between them, every natural and tactful way of disposing of the trifling difficulty made impossible to her consciousness by the electric atmosphere of disguised earnestness and covered significance which emanated from the two. Everything seemed all at once to drop away from the world leaving her alone with those two men, waiting for more than her answer to the insignificant claim.

"There are rules for every game," she said, slowly, her head bent, as she stood before them. "This one is usually decided according to priority, isn't it?" She heard Jack take a quick, hard, breath, the lieutenant had really begun his little speech first. At the same time the latter bent toward her eagerly. "Did I not have the good fortune to precede Mr. Durham, very slightly?" he said, touching his mustache nervously. Anne moved uncertainly, waveringly, toward him. A light sprang to his eyes as he saw the little motion. "Are we to keep strictly to the rules?" he said, with a suppressed triumph in his light tone. "If so, I think Fraulein Gregory belongs to me!"

The girl started and lifted her head sharply. A strange expression flitted across her face. It looked as if she were listening inwardly. "What did you say?" she asked after a moment, very gravely and slowly.

The lieutenant smiled at her with more than a suggestion of claim in his glance. "I said you were mine—for the dance, nicht wahr?" he said, with just a hint of lingering on the word before the pause.

As he said it, it seemed to the man who stood cold and tense with a dawning despair at her other side, that an electric shock ran along the girl's nerves. Her color came and went swiftly. Her eyes flashed open wide and startled. A moment she stood so, in silence, looking at the man who had spoken. Then a sudden sweet little laugh ran from her lips; her face relaxed its tense lines, and she took a quick breath on the end of a slight shiver. With a swift, sure movement she drew slightly back and aside, so that she stood at Mr. Durham's side. "Oh, no; I'm not," she said, with a happy security in her voice. "You are mistaken; I wasn't quite sure myself—before—but I belong to Mr. Durham!"

And as Jack's hand closed eagerly over the one she laid on his arm, and his held breath released itself in a great sigh of passionate relief and joy, she turned to the other candidate with a gentle regret in her tender eyes.

"I am very sorry to seem unkind," she said; "but the fact is, Mr. Durham established his claim—long ago."

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